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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 TEL AVIV 001508

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TAGS: PREL PGOV KWBG IS

SUBJECT: NEW EAST JERUSALEM SETTLEMENTS FAR FROM APPROVED

REF: TEL AVIV 00683

Classified By: Ambassador Richard H. Jones for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

¶1. (C) Summary: On May 13, Dr. Chaim Fialkoff, Senior Deputy Director General for Planning and Coordination at the Ministry of Construction and Housing (MOCH) clarified to econoff that the May 10 Ha'aretz article stating that the Jerusalem municipality had approved three new neighborhoods was inaccurate. According to Fialkoff, Yehoshua Pollack, Jerusalem municipality's Planning and Construction Committee Chairman, proposed that three neighborhoods -- Wallaja, Atarot, and Givat Alona -- be considered as viable sites for future Israeli expansion. Pollack's idea had been proposed in the context of the District Planning Committee's current reevaluation of Jerusalem's master plan and did not serve as a formal request for new construction. Fialkoff stressed that the Jerusalem municipality neither approved plans to build these neighborhoods, nor forwarded them to the District Planning Committee, the next step in this approval process. He noted, however, that actors in the GOI will continue to view these, and other locations within Jerusalem's municipal boundaries (including East Jerusalem) as potential sites to develop Jerusalem's Israeli urban fabric. (Note: If built, two of the three neighborhoods would be considered "settlements" under USG definitions. End note.) End summary.

Rejected Safdie Plan Spurs New Development Ideas

¶2. (C) According to Fialkoff the idea to build three neighborhoods -- Givat Alona, Wallaja, and Atarot -- within the Jerusalem municipal boundaries was recently raised by Jerusalem Planning and Construction Committee Chairman, Yehoshua Pollack, as an alternative to the recently canceled Safdie Plan. As a result of the Safdie Plan's rejection, Pollack proposed that these sites be considered for Israeli expansion in greater Jerusalem since the District Planning Committee is currently reevaluating Jerusalem's master plan. Fialkoff stressed that the Jerusalem municipality neither approved plans to build these neighborhoods, nor forwarded them to the District Planning Committee, the next step in the approval process. (Note: In February 2007, the National Planning and Building Committee rejected the Safdie Plan. The Safdie Plan -- which had been on the drawing board for nearly a decade -- proposed the construction of 20,000 housing units in the West Jerusalem mountains. According to the Ministry of Environmental Protection's website, this plan was rejected by the National Planning and Building Board after being presented with information claiming that some 45,500 housing units could be built on existing land reserves within Jerusalem, enough to supply the city's housing demands until 2020. End note.)

¶3. (C) According to Fialkoff, Pollack likely called for the consideration of these sites as possible areas for Israeli expansion because the ultra-orthodox community, which suffers housing shortages in greater Jerusalem area, makes up the bulk of his constituency. Moreover, as head of the Jerusalem municipality's Planning Committee, Pollack must explore other possibilities to develop Jerusalem's Israeli urban fabric. Fialkoff acknowledged that actors in the GOI will continue to view these and other locations within the Jerusalem municipal boundaries where land reserves exist (including East Jerusalem) as viable sites for Israeli expansion.

Old Plans, None Submitted for Approval

¶4. (C) Fialkoff noted that plans for two of the three neighborhoods mentioned in Ha'aretz are not new and offered the following information:

-- Wallaja: The possibility of building an Israeli neighborhood in the area surrounding the Palestinian village of Wallaja -- located south-west of Jerusalem -- had been previously raised about a decade ago. Fialkoff explained that much of the land surrounding Wallaja was owned by Israelis and thus, served as a potential location for future expansion. Fialkoff stated that although plans for this neighborhood have existed for a long time, no formal plan had been prepared or submitted to the Jerusalem Planning and Construction Committee for approval. In the past, he added, some of this land also had been considered for use as a national park. According to the Ha'aretz article, some of the

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land in this area is owned by Jewish entrepreneurs, some is defined as state land, and some is also defined as being absentee owned. (Note: The USG has been aware that the GOI had existing plans to build a settlement -- Givat Ya'el -- in this area. Plans for Givat Ya'el entail the construction of 12,000 - 13,500 new housing units. If built, this settlement would create continuity between the Gush Etzion settlement bloc, located south-west of Bethlehem, and the Gilo-Givat HaMatos-Har Homa settlements, located north of Bethlehem. End note.)

-- Atarot: Musings of a plan to build a neighborhood in the Atarot airport area had most recently surfaced in February 2007. Per reftel, the MOCH was not -- and currently is not -- sponsoring a plan for the construction of a new residential neighborhood in this area. Fialkoff noted, however, that this site remains a feasible option for GOI actors looking to expand the Israeli presence in East Jerusalem because of the existing Israeli presence, namely, the Atarot airport and industrial zone. Fialkoff commented that the both the airport and the industrial zone are largely nonfunctional. Saying that the Atarot airport has not been operating for security reasons, he added that the feasibility study to make this airport functional has essentially "died."

Fialkoff said that most of the businesses using the industrial zone have left and the current sentiment in the GOI is that this area should not remain an industrial zone. Attorney Danny Seideman's Ir Amim organization also noted that Israel had already expropriated the land in this area more than 35 years ago, making the issues of land ownership easier than in other cases.

-- Givat Alona: Plans to build Givat Alona also were considered by the Jerusalem municipality about a decade ago, but were rejected as not being feasible. Two years ago, plans to build this neighborhood were resurrected and again rejected. Although Fialkoff did not know the specific reasons why this project was rejected, he said that issues with topography, the environment, or problems connecting to infrastructure could have caused the rejection of the plan.

(Note: According to Fialkoff, Givat Alona is located between Mevassaret Tzion and Ramot Alon located in northwest Jerusalem. Due to the lack of detail on size and actual location of this planned neighborhood, it is unclear whether Givat Alon would be considered a settlement by USG definitions since much of the vacant land in this location is within Green Line Israel. End note.)

Comment

15. (C) The USG is aware of about 15 plans to build new settlements or expand existing ones in East Jerusalem. Given the recent cancellation of the Safdie Plan -- which would have pushed Jerusalem's urban development westward -- and the current reevaluation of Jerusalem's master plan, we anticipate hearing more reports of new residential development projects in this area. As the Palestinians and the international community will see further Israeli settlement activity in East Jerusalem as a method of ensuring or expanding a Jewish majority in the city, we have recommended to the Consul General that they raise this issue with the Jerusalem municipality. We will continue to raise this issue with the MOCH, as well as other GOI officials.
End comment.

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JONES